



# Tips for building a women’s leadership initiative in your business

According to a recent study, men drastically outnumber women in senior leadership positions. Women hold roughly one in five C-suite leadership positions, and women of color only hold one in 25 of those positions.<sup>1</sup>

The need for impactful, enduring women’s leadership programs is clear. But how do organizations with the desire to elevate their women employees build one that meets the right criteria?

## Avoiding the obvious oversights

While well-intended business leaders strive to build women’s initiatives, there is often a gap between the program design and its effectiveness.

It’s no secret that women lead very differently. When properly leveraged, those traits can lead to higher overall performance. The unfortunate reality is that when women are not given the ability to use those traits, they’re forced into roles that do not benefit them or the company.

Many program designers don’t even realize that they’re training women to lead like men. The misdirection of those programs can lead women to think they’re failing at leadership when often the problem lies in being asked to go against their innate tendencies to do things like build consensus, create teamwork or lead with empathy.

### Key takeaways



Women hold roughly one in five C-suite leadership positions, and women of color only hold one in 25 of those positions.



The most successful women’s leadership programs include experiences from women in leadership roles.



As you build your program, be sure to include insights from women at all levels of your organization.

Rather than focusing on traditional, transactional leadership models where direction is provided from the top down, programs should focus more on transformational leadership concepts. Transformational leadership allows for more of a focus on leaders exemplifying the skills they seek in employees, along with empowerment and collaboration.<sup>2,3</sup>

Including women leaders who share their experiences in the initiatives can lead to programs that empower women to be true to their innate tendencies, resulting in greater success and satisfaction.

Getting to this “Aha!” moment of helping women work with their strengths rather than against them requires leadership program designers to perform critical research that will help hone their organization’s program to what the women in their company need most.

## Laying the groundwork

Anonymous surveys to assess culture can uncover important blind spots and allow for radical honesty — women need to know they can speak without penalty. For example, if meetings are often scheduled and extend past 5:00 p.m. when women often have to leave to care for children at home, you’re sending an implicit message for your team to choose between work or children.

As you lay the groundwork for a women’s leadership initiative in your company, create ways to gather input from all of the women in your organization. Some leadership programs tend to only focus on women already on a management career track, while the goal of an impactful program would look at the elevation of women throughout the organization.

Once you’ve gathered this input, program designers must move on to the next step, which includes difficult conversations about what’s working in their organizations and what’s not.



## Building your program

When you are building out your women’s advancement programs or looking to revamp ones that are already in place, these tips will help you set the stage for an effective program.

- **Be prepared for tough conversations.**

When soliciting feedback, the executive team must be prepared to hear hard truths that force them to reexamine their biases. Executive teams must acknowledge, understand and take action around the fact that women lead differently—without judgment.

- **Involve both men and women.**

It’s easy to think that women’s programs should be created by and led by women only. But it’s important for your organization to also bring men into the conversation if women are to be seen as full candidates and contributors to the senior management team. Having that diversity of voices and role models is imperative so everyone can find their own voice and success.

- **Be open to ongoing improvements.**

Assessment and recalibration along the way are vital to any program. Continuous feedback is vital to ensure that you’re growing a program alongside your ever-evolving talent pool.

If you’re going to invest in a program, these tips can help your organization build a program that affects real change for women in your organization. For ongoing inspiration, take time to explore other resources and look to organizations that are creating real change in the workplace.



## Steps to take

- **Use anonymous surveys to poll women** about features they'd like to see in your company's initiative. Anonymity allows the women in your company to speak freely and without fear of penalty.
- **Solicit program feedback regularly** and be prepared for tough conversations that will help your program grow.
- **Seek out and offer a general invitation to men** to include them in your diversity initiatives. This diversity of voices and role models is essential to long-term program success.

## The support you need

For more Key4Women resources to help you reach your goals, visit [key.com/women](https://key.com/women) or [email us](#) to learn more.

Would you like to weigh in on future topics? Please take our [survey](#).



<sup>1</sup> Lean In and McKinsey & Company, "Women in the Workplace 2018," <https://womenintheworkplace.com/#pipeline-data>

<sup>2</sup> Sarah K. White; "What is transformational leadership? A model for motivating innovation," <https://www.cio.com/article/3257184/what-is-transformational-leadership-a-model-for-motivating-innovation.html>; February 21, 2018

<sup>3</sup> Key4Women, "Transformational Leadership in Action: Insights From the Executive Suite," <https://www.key.com/businesses-institutions/business-expertise/articles/transformational-leadership.jsp>; September 2018

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